1:Wilson E-5 (1934-1938)1951 FN17 Ngonde FN17
Nyakyusa

CHAPTER II

VILLAGE ORGANIZATION

NYAKYUSA villages (*ifipanga*)[1] are formed by groups of boys or men, all roughly of the same age, together with the wives and young children of those who are married. Women belong to the villages of their husbands, young children to those of their fathers. Girls live at home until they are betrothed, after which they visit their future husbands periodically, and soon after puberty each joins her husband in his village. Boys, who marry later in life, leave home at about the age of ten or eleven and set up villages of their own.

a. The genesis of the village

Between the ages of about six and eleven boys sleep at their fathers' houses and herd their fathers' cattle. This is a full-time, if not a very arduous, occupation. The cattle are driven out about an hour or two after sunrise and return to be milked about 1 p.m.; after an hour they are again driven out and do not come back until sunset. The cattle of a group of neighbours, usually five to ten,[2] are herded together by their young sons; and so these boys spend all day together for several years of their lives. This group of boys is the germ of the future age-village; it is a community with a common activity in the herding of the cattle, with a leader and laws and customs of its own.[3]

When the boys reach the age of ten or eleven, two important changes usually take place in their lives. Firstly, they leave the herding of cows to their younger brothers, and themselves begin the business of hoeing the fields which will occupy them until they die; secondly, they no longer sleep in the houses of their fathers but join an age-village of boys. Nowadays the two changes usually, but not always, take place at the same time, and well before puberty.

[1] cf. Xhosa *intanga*, 'a company of persons or animals of equal age'.

[2] The herd group is smaller in young men's villages where few are cattle-owners, and a very rich man occasionally herds his cattle alone.

[3] G. and M. Wilson, *The Analysis of Social Change*, pp. 51–3.

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Before the establishment of peace by European authority, however, cattle were commonly herded by young men, armed, and only the calves were entrusted to boys, who herded them near the homesteads; therefore moving to a boys' village did not coincide with the change of occupation. Even to-day it is not uncommon for some boys who have reached puberty to be found herding cattle. One we knew herded his father's cattle although he had reached puberty, because he had no younger brothers old enough to take over, and there were only five or six boys in his herd-group altogether. There are also cases where special circumstances put the age of moving later. In one age-village the boys leave home a little later than usual because there are leopards about and it is dangerous for small boys to walk from the village of their fathers to that of the boys, after dark.

When a number of the sons of a village of married men have reached the right age, their fathers give them a piece of land to one side of the parent village on which to build. There they build little huts of reeds for themselves, sufficiently well thatched to keep out the heavy rain, and there they sleep (*vide* Plate II). The building of the huts on this land begins in a playful manner, before the boys move. While they are still herding cows and sleeping at home they build miniature huts there in their spare time, but do not sleep in them. When they move they build slightly more substantial huts with better thatch. At the beginning, when a group of boys starts a new village, or when boys join one already formed, they do not all have huts for themselves: two or three friends share a hut. But later, as they grow older, each builds for himself.

Until he marries each boy hoes his father's fields in his father's village and eats food cooked by his own mother at his father's house, but he sleeps with his friends. Thus between the time when he leaves home and his marriage each is a member of two villages: economically he still belongs to that of his father; socially to that of his own contemporaries. Though bachelors eat at their parents' home, it is very rarely that they do not eat in the company of their own friends. A bachelor does not simply go home to eat by himself, but a group of bachelors, friends living in the same boys' village, go round together eating at the house of each one's mother in turn.

In an age-village of married men there are always several

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villages of the great-grandfathers' generation survived, even ritually (*vide* Document, pp. 881–5).[1]

Men also move from one village to another and they do not always join a village of their exact contemporaries. A stranger may come and be granted land in a village even though he is considerably older or younger than the bulk of its members. Such movement from one village to another is now very considerable: we estimated that at least 80 per cent of the married men have at some time or other moved from the chiefdom in which they first cultivated gardens of their own. There is also movement from village to village within a chiefdom.

Everyone agreed that moving is not something new. In the past a convicted witch was expelled from his village, and sometimes from the chiefdom; thieves and adulterers were also expelled or fled to take refuge with another chief (*vide infra*, pp. 118–9). But it is probable that movement between villages has increased greatly since the imposition of European control. The main reason for moving nowadays is, as we have said, the fear of witchcraft. Subsidiary reasons are the desire to get suitable land for cultivating cash crops, the desire to be near some centre of employment (such as Tukuyu or Rungwe), and the desire to live with others of like mind, as fellow Christians or fellow pagans, fellow Moravians or fellow adherents of the 'Watch Tower' (*vide infra*, pp. 40–3).

Women move from one village to another even more often than men, for, not only do wives move with their husbands, but a girl commonly marries a man of a village other than that in which she grew up, and is later inherited by a kinsman of her dead husband who lives in yet another village. Since first wives are usually ten years younger than their husbands, and junior wives may be forty or fifty years younger, most women are inherited at least once during their lives, and some are inherited several times. The modern high divorce rate accelerates this long-established circulation of women from village to village.

[1] It is possible that the existence of villages of four generations was due to the fact that Mwaipopo continued to live long after the 'coming out' of his heir Mwankuga—a survival not usual in traditional practice (*vide supra*, p. 30).

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595 and children a man has to assist him the more wealth he can produce. The man and his unmarried sons hoe, his wives and young daughters plant, weed and harvest, fetch water, cut firewood and cook the food ; and in other practical activities there is equally fruitful co-operation within the household group.

591 621 882 When a man marries he takes his wife from her father's village to his own where he lives with a group of contemporaries. Each village is in origin an age-group, formed by the sons of some village of adult men who leave home one by one as they reach the age of ten to twelve years and build together on ground set aside for them by their fathers. It is not decent, the Nyakyusa maintain, for a boy to sleep at home after any vigorous interest in sexual activity has awakened in him ; and so, for the fifteen years or more between leaving home and marriage, he sleeps with bachelor friends in a boys' village. He and a group of friends go round in turn to the houses of their respective parents for meals, and each hoes his own parents' fields, but all return to the boys' village at night.

621 882 361 As the members of the boys' village grow older, younger boys just leaving home begin to be refused admittance to it and so either start a fresh village of their own nearby or else join a village of their own contemporaries which has already been started. Boys' villages are thus forever hiving off from the villages of men. At first a boys' village covers but little ground for, as its members are unmarried, the houses are small and close together and there are no garden lands attached to it. But as the young men marry one by one the village expands, houses are built bigger and further apart and some adjacent ground is brought under cultivation, until at last it assumes the normal aspect of a village of adult men.

621 A village thus consists of a male age-group with wives and children attached. Wives may be of any age and there is no such formal age grouping among them as among the men. And, as time goes on, some men too may enter the village who are not exact contemporaries of its other members. When a man dies his heir, either a younger brother or a son, often comes to live in his village ; nor are strangers who apply for land in a village ever, I think, refused on the ground of unsuitable age. Villages vary considerably in size but average forty to fifty households.

At first a village of boys, as we have said, is built on ground allotted to it by the village of their fathers ; but a new allotment is made ceremonially at the " coming out " (*ubusoka*) of the young chiefs.

631 622 Every generation each chiefdom of the Nyakyusa is divided into two halves, a fact which is hard to understand until it is realized that the Nyakyusa consist of a number of immigrant groups which have, until very recently, been expanding their territory within the district and

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her by his anger, others that the husband was to blame for rejecting medical treatment earlier on. The girl herself was reported to have said to her mother-in-law, when she was lying ill at the doctor's house: 'Are you angry with me and has your anger caused the trouble? Perhaps I did not help you in collecting firewood?' But her mother-in-law replied: 'No, I am not angry with you at all.' And the girl continued: 'I know that my father is angry. Someone might go and ask him to pray for me.' There was also tension with the husband's pagan father who had protested that his son was praying for the death of his own children when he prayed with his Pentecostal friends that God's will be done. 'The Pentecostal people say: "I like to die. I don't take any medicine . . . if someone dies or not it is all the same thing." '

Nevertheless, it is true to say that the field in which natural causation is accepted is much wider among Christians than among pagans. It expands very slowly, but the change is evident. Even two cases of 'madness' (*ukubopa ikigili*), invariably the symptom of the wrath of the gods in pagan thought, were interpreted to us by a Christian teacher in terms of grief and shock. The first was of a young man whose wife and grandmother (who lived with him) both died very suddenly, and whose only cow was taken by other relatives and killed for the funeral feast. The loss of the cow following the loss of his wife and grandmother was held to have shattered him finally—'the lineage was finished'. The other case was of a mother, devoted to her daughter, who was distraught when the daughter went off to a distance, accompanying her husband to his place of work. For a daughter to marry beyond easy visiting distance was traditionally inconceivable.

The vagaries of the weather, attributed by the pagans to the neglect of sacrifices or quarrels between chiefs and priests, are explained in scientific terms by some Christians. Heavy rain fell around Rungwe in October 1937 and prevented people burning their rubbish heaps to fertilize their millet gardens. The pagans insisted that such early rain was unheard of and kept asking each other what could have caused it. A Christian elder assured us that the early rain was *not* very unusual in the hill country; he had seen other seasons like it. And in January of the same year the people of Mwaipopo's country were 'astonished' because no heavy rain had fallen and young maize and millet were shrivelling in the ground. They said: 'It has rained all round' and 'it seems as if we had offended Kyala'. Kasitile went to divine (*vide supra*, p. 119).

423 Thus beyond the established fields in the vicinity of the village itself, the pattern of land holding tended to become confused. The majority of land-holders were still members of the village who were expanding their cultivation outwards, but there was a considerable number of men from neighbouring villages, and even from farther afield where opportunities were more restricted. Some men even began to have a second house, inhabited by a junior wife, in another village from which to continue the more easily the cultivation of new holdings. [591]

This sort of development was in the event only a short-term process and, had pressure of population on the land not become so critical, it is not possible to say what would have been the final result upon Nyakyusa social and village organisation. It is, nevertheless, important to note that in the beginnings of the extension of arable holdings, cash-crop cultivation operated in a system in which village exclusiveness was breaking down, when residence was no longer an essential prerequisite of land-holding, and when men were neighbours in the fields as farmers without being coevals of a single village.

Once the Nyakyusa, and particularly the more perceptive headmen, began to realise that land was becoming less plentiful, indeed that it was beginning to be scarce in relation to new demands, this novel tendency was stopped fairly quickly and the old traditional principle of land-holding only by residence was reasserted. In the most recent years this has been strongly insisted on. Headmen and their villagers saw that in order to safeguard their own rights they must prevent scarce, valuable land being held and used by outsiders. This reaction appears to have been universal and automatic among the Nyakyusa. There was now insufficient land for everyone's demands and each village therefore looked after what it considered to be its own interests. Outsiders who already held fields could not be deprived of them, but they were not allowed to extend their holdings and every opportunity was, and still is, taken to regain control of their fields for allocation to villagers proper. Inheritance was often disallowed unless the heir agreed to come and live permanently in the village; gifts or loans to outsiders (kin or friends) were no longer permitted and most headmen seized the opportunity to re-allocate to their own villagers any alien-held plots which were not consistently maintained in cultivation. [622] [186]

In response to the new situation, almost everywhere village boundaries were clearly demarcated – not without a certain amount of dispute and a new recognition of inter-village opposition. Nowhere now is it possible for a man to take up land over which there is no firmly established village ownership. The significant principle has now emerged that not only does a village, as a corporate and distinct group, own its own land and is represented in this by its headman; but all land is now owned by some village. Further, at least in the high-density regions, there is no longer any vacant land to be taken up and any land temporarily falling vacant comes immediately under the allocating authority of the headman. [622]

This process, the application of this principle, is not yet quite universal in the Lake Plains, and it is sometimes still possible to see it coming into operation. Still in the northerly parts of the Lake Plains – the low-density region – one may see fields occupied by a variety of outsiders, for there the realisation of the significance of land shortage has been slowest to come. For example, in Mwakipesile's chiefdom in the late 1940s and early 1950s it was the practice of men from the congested villages nearer the Lake to obtain valuable, virgin paddy land in the newly opened areas in the north (near Ipinda) without residential qualifications. Many men reserved their original holdings in their own villages for food crops and had their main paddy fields in this distant area. By 1955, however, it had become virtually impossible for a non-resident to obtain extra land in this way, although still 423 178